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High-end safaris used to be formal affairs, steeped in history and tradition. At Ulusaba the experience may be more contemporary and uplifting, but you're just as likely to encounter a lion outside your lodge

BY JESSICA BOWEN

"Elephant on the right!" shouts co-pilot Ben, over his tannoy as our 12-seater Fed-Air plane rumbles down an incongruous strip of tarmac that runs through the vast expanse of African bushveld surrounding it. "Welcome to Ulusaba" announces Ben.

I've been on safari before, I've ticked off the big five, but when the offer of a trip to Ulusaba game reserve came my way I was the first to sign up. My expectations were high; I wanted the adventure, I wanted to feel that I was out in the wild where I'm not quite in control but on top of this I wanted to eat well, drink well, lose track of time and come away feeling completely pampered.

Ulusaba is immersed in the depths of the African wilderness in the Sabi Sands, a privately owned park bordering the Kruger National Park. A spine of kopjes (small hills) runs through the area and it is from Ulusaba's Rock Lodge, which is built into the cliffside of one of these hills, that you really get a scope of the immensity of this reserve. A vine of orange Land Rover tracks weave their way through a low-lying landscape, thick with vegetation during the South African summer, interrupted only by the Lebombo mountains that define the border with Mozambique on the far horizon. I try and remember the last time I was able to see this far and realise that I probably haven't, except from the air.

The reserve is divided into two lodges, Rock Lodge and Safari Lodge where my River Room borders the dry Mabrak riverbed, an established elephant path to the nearby watering hole. It is 'the wild' and I am in the thick of it and yet when I arrive it's the unadulterated splendour of the lodge itself that is most distracting. My treehouse style

room is Africa as my imagination would have it, accessed by a swing bridge, topped with a thatched roof and decked out with a hand-crafted four-poster bed made from tree-trunks, dark wooden floors and a strategically placed bath and plunge pool with views out on to the bush.

Richard Branson, who bought Ulusaba as his private game reserve in 1999, is the man responsible for bringing the reserve up to the film-set standard it achieves today. It is luxury at its most contemporary. The buildings blend seamlessly into the landscape with trees growing up through rooms, walls of rock where a room has been carved into the hillside and natural items found in the reserve, such as an elephant's jaw bone and kudu horns as decoration. It feels like the real deal, just an exceptionally good version of it.

Branson's stamp is not only evident in the quality of everything on offer at Ulusaba but also in the unmistakable sense that nothing is taken too seriously here. Sam and Donald, our ranger and tracker, are a case in point. Like mischievous brothers they like to act up on a car ride. Donald from the local Shangaan community has a curious aversion to chameleons which Sam takes every opportunity to exploit on our game drives and in return Donald makes a habit of jumping out of bushes on the roadside as we pass, which, when we were expecting lions, has a rather amplified effect.

But, lions we got. A knock on my door one evening signals dinnertime. It is dark, except for a huge orange moon, and I am under strict management instruction not to leave my room on my own after nightfall in case of lurking predators. I take heed and a security guard escorts me along the candlelit walkways and rope bridge to Safari

Lodge. As we approach the wine cellar where we will be dining that evening he pauses and I freeze. "Did you hear that?" he asks. I had heard something but the noise had faded into the low hum of an unfamiliar nightlife. "The lions are coming." Great, and here we are about to dine al fresco. The roars continue through the evening but I head to bed mindful of the 5am wake-up call that's looming and fall asleep immediately. The next morning security tell us how they watched as four male lions passed through the lodge within metres of our rooms, a reminder that this is their turf and we are the interlopers.

Eating out in the elements however is part of the charm. We drink hot chocolate and Amarula with a herd of giraffe in the shade of the Marula Tree on our morning game drive and sip Veuve Cliquot and chew on biltong in the company of zebra in the evening while listening to Sam's close-call stories. In between drives, back at the lodge, there are lean impala pittas, hearty kudu burgers and ostrich salads. Gooey homemade marshmallow and mini doughnuts with afternoon tea and dinners of spiced scallops, passionfruit drizzled lemon tarts and Hamilton Russell Pinot Noir are outshone only by the setting - a private treehouse terrace overlooking a dam where the hippos and frogs serenade. It feels like the staff have had a word with the wildlife and orchestrated the whole thing.

Of course, the essence of safari lies with the animals, in the idea of reconnecting with nature, of roughing it in the company of beasts larger than ourselves but if I can do all this before breakfast and still fit in a quick trip to the spa and dip in the plunge pool before lunch then consider my expectations met.



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- 01. Blending into the scenery, Ulusaba Cliff Lodge
- 02. Ulusaba Safari Lodge dining room
- 03. The treehouse style room is pure Africa
- 04. Dining among the elements is just part of the experience